

10 Things Every New Social Worker Needs To Know About People

By: Linda Conroy, M.Ed.

If you are reading this article, you are probably a new social worker or someone working as a support to families in some way. This work can be scary, as it is about people's lives. I am happy to have this opportunity to tell you some things I wish someone had explained to me when I started working as a child protective services worker. I hope these words may help you and your families thrive together. Thank you for carrying on the work of supporting families in being safe and healthy.

1. No one plans to abuse or neglect their children. Remember a time when you visited a new baby and everyone played pass the baby, who was the most adorable thing you had ever seen. All families do it. All parents have big dreams, ideals, and plans, even if they are young, uneducated, or poor. Their plans don't include being homeless, being a victim of other adults, or being addicted to substances. They never imagine that they will neglect their parental duties. This happens when things go wrong, and things can go wrong for lots of reasons. Although most parents genuinely want to change and do better for their children, they may have had too much to overcome and not enough skills to manage their own lives adequately. Perhaps no one has ever done for them what you are going to do—offer them a sense of hope for safety, security and a good tomorrow, with no shame or blame attached.

2. Every situation is unique. Every person is unique. Every family is unique. When you receive a new assignment and find yourself thinking, "This is easy. This is like last month's family who lived next door," or, "I worked with her sister before, and she's probably just like her," remember this—not the same, not the same, not the same, never the same, might look the same and might sound the same but NOT THE SAME. Everyone is unique, and everyone has a right to be heard for who they are. Everyone has unique skills, strengths, and idiosyncrasies. Keep looking and listening until you see each person.

3. Remember you have most of the power. If you are a child protective services worker, a counselor, a teacher, a child care provider, or anyone who has a responsibility to report concerns of child abuse, it isn't easy for parents to talk to you if they are afraid they have done wrong. They don't have an equal or mutual relationship with you. Parents think you must be way better than them, way smarter, way more capable, and they know you are way more powerful. You are the "they" that they worry about. Parents who might be abusive or neglectful are ashamed and embarrassed to talk to you. They might lie to you, not because they are hapless, manipulative liars, but because they are scared and because they have learned all their lives that authorities are not to be trusted. They may be so scared that they are not thinking as they speak. They may tell you only what they think you want to hear. It's easy to abuse your power if you are also scared and afraid you won't do a good job, but remember the more fair you can make it, the more reassurance you can give, the more caring you are, and the more honest you are, the more they will tell you.

4. Listening will help more than talking. Once, during a Family Team Decision Making meeting, I reassured a woman that we were there to listen to each other and that no one was going to judge or blame her. She was not convinced, and for good reason. The social worker said that her child would be in danger if she hangs out with her gang-related friends. Others around the table nodded, so although she had separated from her gang-related partner and was living with her mother, she felt frustrated, as she did not know what else to do. How could she prove that she intended to take good care of her child? She knew a lot about how gangs operate and knew some people who were unsafe, but this didn't mean that she was unsafe. Finally tired of being told how she must live, she blurted out, "None of you have any idea how I have lived. None of you know anything about what I have gone through. None of you have been part of a gang." There was silence in the room. Of course, she was right. We needed to listen and learn from her, and discuss safety WITH her. Remember that even though we may have the law on our side and have impressive titles and degrees, our service recipients know a lot of things that we don't know, including intimate knowledge of what works in their own families. Listening is a win-win thing. We all end up ahead.

5. People treat others the way they have been treated. Parents who are having difficulties may yell at you, swear at you, and blame you. It is what they know. They act in ways they learned in their own families. They may not have learned to think about how they treat others, may not have learned to calm themselves in order to speak politely, may not know that problems can be solved without yelling or drama, may not know that they can have control over their lives, and may not have any sense of hope for tomorrow or the future. Don't take their behavior personally. Keep the conversation safe while talking about how serious the problem might be. Roll with their resistance. Don't argue or fight. If you get defensive, who will listen to them?

6. Respecting people doesn't mean there is no bottom line. Respect will get you much farther than abruptness, control, or condescension. Many years ago, a co-worker observed that I treated people nicely, too nicely. "You're not going to make it here," she said, "You have to be firm with them," she said, meaning the recipients of services. "There has to be a bottom line." I mulled this over for a few minutes. When a good parent corrects her child, it is done with love and care and clarity. If the parent is clear, there is no doubt in the child's mind what is intended. There is a bottom line. Why would the same rule not apply to adults? Of course I treat people nicely! What other way is there, if I want them to hear me?

7. People are doing the best they can at any moment. So why is it that sometimes we find it so difficult to have compassion for another adult, especially one who has done something of which we don't approve? We think they should have known so much better. However, every behavior makes some sense if you take time to look at it. Understanding people makes it easier to care about them. Everyone is the way they are for a reason. Help them move to the next moment when they can do a little better. Recognize every little step they make in the right direction. It is not your job to punish them for their behavior. Shame doesn't help them to change. Hope does.

8. People can tell you what they need. Once in a conversation with a young mother, I asked what she did well as a parent. She told me a few things, then seeing me smile in response, told me some more. I asked her what was difficult for her. "Well," she said "I do have this problem. I yell too much. Sometimes I just can't help it." My answer, "Let's talk about how we can help you change that." No blame, no shame, no anger, just listening, caring, and a plan. No one came away feeling bad.

9. People need to know you care. Their emotional brain needs you more than their cognitive brain does. They don't really care how much you know or how important you are. They need to know you will help them with the stuff that they have now laid out for you to see. Let them save face. Let them know they can change. Think of a time when things were difficult in your life. It was the people who showed that they cared and believed in you that made a difference, wasn't it, that helped you make the right choices? You can have appropriate boundaries and realistic expectations at the same time as showing compassion.

10. The person of the worker makes all the difference. Did you ever think you might be on the other side of the table? Are you doing this work because you know how it feels to be depressed, oppressed, demoralized, or disenfranchised? Or do you believe that it is fortunate that you were blessed with the right parents, the right education? Coming from either place can be good, but remember, we all could have been there if things had played out differently. Are you being a real human contact for the families or playing a directing role of social worker, counselor, teacher? Are you judging or controlling, instead of recognizing the person's human frailties? People will remember their contact with you long after you have forgotten them. Make it meaningful, positive, and heartening for them, even if they have made some poor choices. You will feel much better at the end of each day.

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